Climate Change and Accelerating Water Asset Deterioration Across Australia

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Executive Summary

Australia's water infrastructure is facing unprecedented stress due to climate change. Rising temperatures, prolonged droughts, intense rainfall events, flooding, sea level rise, and bushfires are accelerating the deterioration of water assets nationwide. Water pipelines, reservoirs, treatment plants, pumping stations, wastewater systems, and stormwater networks were historically designed for relatively stable environmental conditions. However, the increasing variability and severity of climate conditions are exposing weaknesses in ageing infrastructure systems and significantly reducing asset life expectancy.

Across Australia, utilities are reporting an increase in water main breaks, higher maintenance costs, more frequent service interruptions, and declining water quality. Climate-driven soil movement, corrosion, salinity intrusion, thermal stress, and flood-related damage are now major contributors to infrastructure degradation. Many underground assets constructed in the 1960s and 1970s are operating beyond their intended lifespan, making them especially vulnerable to extreme environmental conditions.

The impact is not only physical but also financial and operational. Reactive maintenance approaches are becoming increasingly unsustainable as emergency repairs consume an ever-larger share of utility budgets. At the same time, climate variability is increasing operational uncertainty for water authorities responsible for ensuring reliable water supply and wastewater services.

This report examines the major climate-related drivers accelerating the deterioration of water assets across Australia, identifies the most vulnerable asset classes, discusses emerging operational and financial challenges, and outlines adaptation strategies that utilities can adopt to improve resilience and long-term sustainability.

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Introduction

Climate change has evolved from being primarily an environmental concern into a major infrastructure risk across Australia. Water systems are among the most exposed infrastructure sectors because they operate continuously under changing environmental conditions and are highly dependent on climate stability.

Australia is experiencing increasing temperatures, reduced average rainfall in southern regions, more severe droughts, more frequent heatwaves, intense storm events, and rising sea levels. According to the Bureau of Meteorology and CSIRO climate assessments, Australia's mean surface temperature has increased significantly since 1910, while rainfall patterns have become more volatile.

Water infrastructure was largely designed using historical climate assumptions that no longer reflect current or future environmental conditions. As a result, many systems are underprepared for modern climate stressors. Climate change is accelerating physical deterioration processes, increasing operational failures, and reducing infrastructure reliability.
The challenge is compounded by the age of Australia's water infrastructure. Many utilities continue to operate pipelines and treatment assets that are decades old and nearing the end of their design lives. Infrastructure Australia has identified ageing water assets and climate impacts as critical national infrastructure concerns requiring urgent investment over the next decade.

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Key Climate Drivers Accelerating Asset Deterioration

Rising Temperatures and Heatwaves

Increasing temperatures and prolonged heatwaves are accelerating the deterioration of water infrastructure across Australia. Extreme heat weakens pipelines, pumps, seals, membranes, and electrical systems through continuous thermal expansion and contraction, increasing the risk of cracks, leaks, and joint failures. Heat also intensifies wastewater corrosion by increasing hydrogen sulfide generation inside sewer systems, leading to concrete degradation. Additionally, higher water demand during heatwaves places extra pressure on ageing distribution networks, increasing burst frequencies and reducing operational reliability.

Drought and Soil Movement

Extended drought conditions cause soil shrinkage and ground movement, placing significant stress on buried water infrastructure. Pipelines experience bending, settlement, and joint displacement, with older materials such as asbestos cement and cast iron being especially vulnerable to cracking. Drought also encourages tree root intrusion into pipelines and sewer systems. Reduced reservoir inflows and higher salinity levels increase operational pressure on treatment facilities and pumping systems, particularly in climate-sensitive regions such as the Murray–Darling Basin.

Flooding and Extreme Rainfall

Extreme rainfall and flooding create major risks for water and wastewater infrastructure by saturating soils, destabilising underground assets, and increasing structural loading pressures. Flood events can damage treatment plants, pumping stations, and electrical infrastructure while overwhelming drainage and sewer systems, causing overflows and contamination risks. Heavy rainfall also increases sediment and turbidity in waterways, forcing treatment facilities to operate under greater stress and accelerating equipment wear. Urban flash flooding is placing growing pressure on stormwater systems that were designed for historical rainfall conditions.

Sea Level Rise and Salinity Intrusion

Sea level rise and storm surges are increasing the exposure of coastal water infrastructure to saltwater intrusion and flooding. Higher salinity levels accelerate corrosion in steel pipelines, concrete structures, pumps, valves, and marine assets. Coastal wastewater treatment facilities are particularly vulnerable to flooding and saline damage. In addition, seawater intrusion reduces the effectiveness of low-lying drainage systems during high tides and storm events, further increasing long-term infrastructure deterioration risks.

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Ageing Infrastructure Vulnerability

- Ageing pipelines are highly vulnerable to climate stress.
- Older materials such as asbestos cement and cast iron deteriorate faster under extreme conditions.
- Water main breaks are increasing across urban networks.
- Deferred maintenance worsens long-term infrastructure damage.
- Many systems lack smart monitoring and climate-resilient technologies.

Water Quality Impacts

- Heavy rainfall increases sediment and contaminant runoff.
- Droughts increase salinity and harmful algal bloom risks.
- Bushfires contaminate reservoirs and catchments.
- Flooding can overwhelm sewer systems and cause overflows.
- Higher temperatures increase wastewater odour and corrosion.

Financial and Operational Consequences

- Emergency repairs and failures are increasing operational costs.
- Utilities face higher leakage and non-revenue water losses.
- Treatment processes are becoming more complex and energy-intensive.
- Extreme weather creates workforce and safety challenges.
- Climate uncertainty complicates long-term infrastructure planning.

Operational challenges include:

- *Increasing burst frequency and leakage*
- *Rising non-revenue water losses*
- *Greater treatment complexity*
- *Increased energy consumption*
- *Reduced infrastructure reliability*
- *Workforce safety risks during extreme weather*
- *Higher insurance and recovery costs*

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Adaptation and Resilience Strategies

To manage accelerating deterioration risks, Australian utilities are increasingly adopting climate-resilient asset management approaches.

Predictive Asset Management

Data-driven predictive maintenance allows utilities to identify vulnerable assets before failures occur. Technologies such as IoT sensors, vibration monitoring, pressure transient analysis, and condition assessment tools improve visibility across ageing networks.

Climate-Resilient Materials

Utilities are transitioning toward more durable materials resistant to corrosion, thermal stress, and soil movement. Improved protective coatings, corrosion-resistant alloys, and flexible pipeline materials can extend infrastructure lifespan.

Smart Monitoring Systems

Digital water systems enable continuous monitoring of pressure, flow, leakage, water quality, and structural integrity. Smart systems improve operational responsiveness during extreme weather events.

Diversified Water Supply

Australia is investing in desalination, water recycling, stormwater harvesting, and regional water security projects to reduce dependence on climate-sensitive catchments.

Integrated Climate Planning

Future infrastructure planning increasingly incorporates climate projections into asset design, lifecycle modelling, and investment prioritisation. Climate adaptation is becoming central to infrastructure decision-making processes.

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Final Thoughts

Climate change is rapidly accelerating the deterioration of water infrastructure across Australia. Rising temperatures, droughts, floods, sea level rise, and bushfires are placing unprecedented pressure on ageing water and wastewater systems.

Traditional infrastructure design assumptions are no longer sufficient under increasingly volatile climate conditions. As environmental stress intensifies, utilities face rising maintenance costs, more frequent failures, declining water quality, and growing operational uncertainty.

The combination of ageing infrastructure and climate extremes creates a critical infrastructure challenge for Australia. Without substantial investment in resilience, predictive maintenance, smart monitoring, and climate-adaptive infrastructure, the reliability and sustainability of water services will continue to decline.

However, climate adaptation also presents an opportunity to modernise Australia's water sector. By integrating digital technologies, resilient materials, proactive asset management, and long-term climate planning, utilities can improve infrastructure reliability while reducing long-term operational risk.

Ensuring climate-resilient water infrastructure will be essential for protecting public health, supporting economic growth, maintaining environmental sustainability, and securing Australia's future water security.

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